



The metamorphosis of the revolutionary intellectual

Without repeating the cliché, let me sincerely say that that this is a great opportunity for me to converse with my fellow intellectuals in honour of Harold Wolpe, I wish to thank Wolpe posthumously for giving us an excuse for self-reflection.

I would also like to thank the University of Wits for flying me from Cape Town to Johannesburg and inviting me to do this lecture. Most of all, I am grateful to the Institute of Poverty and Land Reform (PLAAS) at the University of Western Cape

Issa Shivji
University of Dar es Salaam
Tanzania

which awarded me a two-month Visiting Professorship to its campus. This has allowed me to get a peep, (only a peep, I must say), into your intellectual discourses. More fascinating have been your street languages and the freedom with which you discuss your political affairs and

the governors of your state. To be sure, I cannot say how free the streets are when I see early morning homeless scavenging foods from black bins of trash from palacious white bungalows. It seems the sun has not yet set on your sunset clauses! I should restrain myself from treading on this slippery and sensitive ground – slippery for me, sensitive for you!

Let me first start by declaring interest and making a disclaimer. My presentation today is an auto-critique, in two senses – personal

and collective. Collective is a shorthand reference to African intellectuals of whom I have first-hand knowledge through our “ideological struggles” in East Africa in the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s, and through our splendid pan-Africanist organisation, CODESRIA.

In my presentation you may find that I exaggerate and even caricature. I make no apologies because I believe I am exaggerating the truth to make a point and that is permissible. I draw validation of my style from one of our great revolutionary intellectuals, Archie Mafeje. During the debate on democratisation in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, there was an interesting exchange between Thandika Mkandawire, Ibbo Mandaza and Peter Anyang’ Nyongo, in which I made a short intervention. Mafeje reviewed this debate in his brilliant and brutal piece called, “Breaking bread with my fellow-travellers” (1995). Commenting on my piece, he said, and I quote:

He trivialised his own problematique by presenting it in a Charlie Chaplain fashion. ... But, as is known, Charlie Chaplin’s message was always very profound to the disquiet of the Americans who found it necessary to deport him back to his native England.

Irrespective of the reaction Shivji elicited from his colleagues (irritation from Mandaza and disgust from Anyang’ if only with his ‘hackneyed terms’), his diagnosis is more correct than most and, theoretically, is better founded than that of his detractors.

Pardon my immodesty but then modesty is not the petty bourgeois intellectual’s forte!

Intellectuals are producers and purveyors of ideas. They produce all kinds of ideas: ideas to rationalise and legitimise, ideas to explain and deceive; ideas to mystify and mesmerize; ideas to decorate and demonise; ideas to inform and entertain – all kinds of ideas. They may produce ideas gratuitously or, these days, more often than not, for a price. Thus, ideas become a commodity, an artificial commodity. To Karl Polanyi’s list of three artificial commodities – land, labour and money – we should add a fourth one – ideas. When mystifying and clarifying ideas are fused together and systematised in a coherent whole, they become ideologies. As ideologies are propagated and disseminated, and internalised, they become common sense - beyond doubt, beyond question. Such ideologies we call hegemonic – à la Gramsci.

Intellectuals produce ideas to explain and define others, and in the service of others. But they also produce ideas to define and serve themselves. They are very good at producing self-serving ideas. They exaggerate and inflate their importance and role, their indispensability and alacrity, their sanctimony and sacrifice. Intellectuals are one species who are egoistic to the bone. But being masters of mystification, they package their egoism in altruism.

Who are intellectuals? Half a century ago when yours truly was still a student, Ali Mazrui, the rising and shining intellectual star of the time, defined an intellectual as someone who is fascinated by ideas. ‘Even a clown is fascinated by ideas’, a student-comrade retorted,

obviously in ridicule. Now with the maturity of hindsight, I say: why not? Indeed, a clown is an intellectual. And some clowns are very good intellectuals. They can do something that academic intellectuals cannot do. They poke fun at power; they ridicule power. They not only speak truth to power, as Edward Said would have it, but they also speak to people, which many of us fail to do. We speak to each other, and, a few, to our credit, do dare speak truth to power! If such few did not exist, we would have fallen from people’s grace long ago.

A revolutionary intellectual of humble intellectual origins (he was a school teacher), sitting in a fascist jail in Italy, gave us the first significant classification of intellectuals – organic intellectuals. To simplify Gramsci somewhat, we can say there are organic intellectuals of the ruling bloc and there are organic intellectuals of the dominated classes. They generate and articulate respective ideologies from the elements of existing ideologies according to the hegemonic logic or principle of the dominating or dominated bloc. Organic intellectuals of the oppressed and exploited social classes may be considered, proto revolutionary intellectuals to the extent that they seek to make the ideology - by word and deed – of the oppressed hegemonic. By thus participating in ideological struggles, they contribute to the underlying class struggle, even though they may not participate directly in such struggles. Some of these organic intellectuals may become actual revolutionary intellectuals by directly participating in class struggles.

We have examples of such revolutionary intellectuals in our midst. Amílcar Cabral was one such intellectual; so were Chris Hani, John Garang, Félix Moumié, and Walter Rodney, to name a few. All of them were assassinated at strategic moments in the respective struggles they were involved in. We do not know how they would have metamorphosed on attaining power. I know of at least one and his metamorphosis in power – Yoweri Kaguta Museveni. He was the head of our University Students African Revolutionary Front (USARF) when we were students at the University of Dar es Salaam. He was involved in armed struggle to oust Idi Amin Dada, the coup leader who overthrew Obote and ushered in an 8-year reign of terror in Uganda. Museveni, through armed struggle, overthrew Obote II and came to power with a pretty radical programme of transformation. Once in power, he was so fascinated by it that now he does not want to leave it. (I am not sure if it is a normal trajectory – from being fascinated by ideals of power to being fascinated by power. I guess power produces its own ideas – like the idea of immortality in power.) I am sure there are many examples of such metamorphosis in South Africa. I can think of a couple but dare not name names, partly because I do not know enough – no investigation, no right to speak – and partly because I am not on my home terrain.

Some putative, revolutionary intellectuals, particularly in the academia, metamorphose into public intellectuals. This is a relatively new term in the African

discourse on intellectuals. I cannot recall if that is how we described ourselves in the heydays of 60s and 70s. Public intellectuals, I take it, are political intellectuals. They comment on everything political but also on matters not so political. They are articulate and admired by young aspiring intellectuals and have many followers on social media. They are sought after by the media to comment on anything and everything. Their works and deeds are in the public domain and they do not shy away from publicity which, occasionally, puts them on the firing line of politicians.

A few, brilliant ones, migrate to the North joining ivy leagues. Many, not so “brilliant”, remain home. A few of the remainder continue to be in academia weathering the storm of economic scarcity and overt and covert political repression. Not so few, give up intellectual vocation altogether. They shift their terrain to NGOs and policy institutes, where donor pressure and funding constraints metamorphose them from public intellectuals to policy pundits. Other few, not so few in some countries, “enter” politics as practitioners. They become politician-intellectuals. Very soon they find themselves increasingly giving up the consistency and commitment required of a public intellectual to become politician-entrepreneurs.

When I talk of few entering political power, I am not referring only to state power. I include entering other sites of power – à la Foucault – like university administrations.

What about our migrants to the North? A significant few attain celebrity status. They are held up as an example of some – I say some! – brilliance in an otherwise intellectually barren continent. They are under pressure to produce best sellers to maintain their status. And what sells best in the North is that which finds a niche in the academic fashion of the day. Which means they end up recycling and regurgitating the same content packaged in fancier language.

Edward Said says somewhere that all organic intellectuals are public intellectuals but all public intellectuals are not organic intellectuals (see Said 1994). I agree with the second part – all public intellectuals are NOT organic intellectuals. In fact, many public intellectuals give up their organic link with the oppressed masses so as not to tarnish their public image. I am not sure, though, of the first part of Said’s statement. I do not think ALL organic intellectuals are public intellectuals. If I am right in my description of public intellectuals, then organic intellectuals are not, and cannot afford to be public intellectuals. Their loyalty is not to the amorphous public. Their loyalty is to the oppressed, the down trodden, to the wretched of the earth. And more often than not, that loyalty has to be hidden, has to be disguised and at times has even to go underground rather than be exhibited in public. When Said made that statement, maybe, he was thinking of public intellectuals in the North, or public intellectuals of the South living in the North.

Then there is another category of intellectuals. Fidel Castro, agonising over the role of intellectuals in the Cuban revolution, in an address to the conference of writers and artists in 1961, talked about what he called honest intellectuals. Honest intellectuals do not want to tell lies. They want to pursue truth and stick to truth. But they do not want to speak truth to power. They do not want to take sides. That is not the job of intellectuals. They plead objectivity and neutrality. They desire change but do not want to do anything about it. They are fence sitters. As fence sitters they are vulnerable; inevitably they roll over to the side of domination, their neutrality notwithstanding.

Honest intellectuals constitute a huge chunk of academic intellectuals. Their site of operation is universities and institutions of higher education. As the academia is increasingly commodified, universities become market places. Academics, willingly or under duress, must break up their courses and introduce new ones to make them saleable to the consumers. They must package, brand and certify their products. History becomes tourism and heritage; corporate greed becomes corporate responsibility and democratic governance is taught as good governance. Archaeology is museumised whose artifacts are

exhibited at a fee to ignorant and disinterested American tourists. Political economy is replaced by econometrics, with no sense of either politics or economy. Africans in Africa study Africa in Centres of African Studies in the image of Centres in the North. Are not all our studies African studies? Law students write PhDs applying the convention on rights of indigenous people to their own citizens. To talk of citizens' rights is foreign, Western; to ruminate on indigenous rights is authentic, African! We have been metamorphosed – from colonial natives and migrants to neo-colonial indigenous and tyrants, thanks to imperial intellectuals and their African caricatures.

A few resist the metamorphosis but many, with an eye on funding, job-security and promotions resign to their fate, taking pride in the ranking of their universities. Just as Fitch and Moody's give credit rating to our countries, some fishy ranking agencies in the North rank our universities. Once upon a time our universities took pride in being centres of controversy; now we covet to become centres of excellence. You cannot attain excellence if you're controversial! This is a simple truth that is often overlooked.

As I approach the end of my auto-critique, let me take the tongue out of my cheek and pay tribute

to hundreds of revolutionary, including public intellectuals, who have sacrificed their lives and families in the service of the liberation of their countries and the emancipation of the masses. Revolutionary intellectuals led our liberation movements. Revolutionary intellectuals initiated and organised our left, and democratic, formations. Thugs and mercenaries of imperialism and their hirelings have murdered revolutionary intellectuals all over the continent. They have been subjected to torture and humiliation of prison as Harold Wolpe was. But with Thomas Sankara they continue chanting: "While revolutionaries as individuals can be murdered, you cannot kill ideas."

Revolutionary intellectuals, whether living or dead, continue to inspire and lead by example our young intellectuals. Revolutionary intellectuals are humble and modest people. They do not inflate their role nor do they suffer from inflated egos. They remain the beacon of hope.

History will award them.

Note

Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture 2017, University of Wits, South Africa, 19 October 2017.